

Cessation of driving in later life may not result in dependence

Laurie R Buys, PhD & Lorelei Carpenter, PhD

School of Human Services, Queensland University of Technology

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Abstract

For most young adults, obtaining a drivers licence represents an important step towards achieving independence. The correlation between driving and independence appears to strengthen as we grow older, so that we do all we can to retain our licence. The *purpose* of this research is to investigate whether the cessation of driving in later life leads to a reduction of perceived independence of older adults. *Design and methods*: The respondents are 26 individuals over the age of 70 years living in the Brisbane, Australia metropolitan area. Half of these are current drivers with the remainder having surrendered their licence within the past two years. Semi-structured, qualitative, telephone interviews were used to gather data. *Results*: the data reveal that older drivers insist that the cessation of driving would result in the loss of their independence and reduce their ability to conduct activities in the community. However, the stories of ex-drivers directly challenge these strongly held assumptions. The ex-drivers report that relinquishing their drivers licence was a struggle, but this struggle concluded in them re-defining their use of transport in order to maintain their desired life style. *Implications*: We argue that this process of struggle represents another of life's rites of passage which may not lead to a loss of independence.

Key Words: Rite of passage; Independence; Older adults; driving

Introduction

Independence has been defined as the “ability to function without the need for continual/ongoing surveillance and to carry out basic activities of daily living such as dressing, feeding, going to the toilet and personal hygiene with competence and safety. Independent people defined in this way may be fit, healthy and active in community life, or they may need some assistance with certain aspects of daily living, such as shopping, banking or transport” (1 p. xv). Retaining independence is consistently rated by older adults as one of the most important aspects of successfully growing old (2, 3).

Practitioners and researchers have suggested that independence includes more than physical functioning. For example, at the United Nations World Assembly Special Session on Ageing in 1992, Australian Senator Patricia Giles outlined the following three conditions on which independence for older people is contingent: “having adequate incomes, housing that provides not only shelter but a secure and supportive environment for daily living, and access to the same range of activities as others in the community” (4, p. 5). Clearly, independence for older adults is a complex issue. However, there appears to be an acknowledgment that, at the most basic level, independence involves the ability to function adequately within one’s environment.

Marotolli et al. (5) maintain that older people’s capacity to access services and amenities directly impacts on their ability to maintain independent living. Within this context driving in later life has been directly linked with independent living (6) as it enables older people to maintain active interaction within the community. An example of the linkage between independence and driving is demonstrated by older people using their car get to shops, meetings, doctors, church, hospitals, for socialising and so forth (6, 7).

The close link that has been made between driving and independence in our society (5) has resulted in the cessation of driving being negatively linked with independence. Researchers have found that serious dislocation to social networks occurs without access to a car (6) and Persson (8) argues that giving up driving for older adults means a reduction in their independence, convenience, and mobility and may force them into an accommodation change. This paper challenges these assumptions and explores the possibility that the process of ceasing to drive in later life may represent a rite of passage that does not necessarily lead to a loss of independence.

If we accept that later life can be an opportunity for involvement, learning and self-discoveries, the stereotypical notion of old age as a time for preparing for death comes under dispute. Each stage of life varies and presents individuals with a new set of struggles and challenges to overcome. The later life stage is no less challenging and meaningful nor devoid of transitions. These struggles and challenges can be witnessed in particular when older people cease driving activities.

With the increase in the population of people over the age of 65 years and the increased life expectancy (9), comes a reshaping of the adult life cycle that reflects the rapidity and complexity of changes taking place in society. The adult life cycle has been described as stages (10, 11) or phases (12). For example, Erikson (10) refers to stages of life from infancy to old age as being marked with a specific psychological struggle. He identifies the last stage of adulthood as integrity and despair with the outcome of wisdom. Likewise Sheehy (13) uses a stage

approach in discussing the various phases of the life cycle. Sheehy (13) divides adulthood into two stages: First Adulthood and Second Adulthood. First adulthood lies between the ages of 30 and 45 and is followed by second adulthood, a stage that continues until death. Second adulthood is further separated into two stages: Age of Mastery (45 to 65 years) and Age of Integrity (65 to 85 plus years).

The movement from one stage to another has been referred to as a crisis (11), rite of passage (13), or transition (14). D'Apice (14) refers to a transition as a time when the person engages in the task of re-evaluating and acknowledging prior information or knowledge of preceding stages. This process can result in a new way of living enabling the person to discover a different identity, as well as a time of growth that is life giving and energising. Similarly, Levinson (11) refers to this as a time when existing structures are reassessed and altered. The transition provides the opportunity to engage in the tasks of evaluating, reorganising and synthesising prior information and knowledge so that new alternatives of living can be explored and adjustments to a new age can be made. Once this process is complete the next stage of life can commence.

The process of becoming an ex-driver may be viewed as a rite of passage in later life. The rite of passage concept was first introduced by Arnold Van Gennep (15) who claimed that an individual's life was as a series of passages from one defined position or stage to another. Van Gennep claimed that each passage was marked by three stages: separation, transition and incorporation. Separation is a time of ceasing the activities common to that particular life stage. Transition represents a time of waiting and resting until passing on to the next stage. Incorporation is the time of beginning new activities.

Method

Stories from a group of older adults who are still driving or have ceased driving were used to explore the notion of rites of passage. The stories were collected using a semi-structured process of telephone interviewing. The aim of this methodology was to elicit narratives or storied accounts of the meaning of driving as well as the way in which people make the transition from a driver to an ex-driver. The type of narrative that was obtained was personal experience narrative (16) based on anecdotal, everyday, commonplace experiences that were important in the lives of the respondents.

Two small groups of older adults living in the suburban areas of Brisbane, Australia were invited to be interviewed during the months of May and June 2000. In order to be included in the study, respondents needed to have been a driver during most of their adult lives and be over the age of 70 years. The researchers chose to interview adults over the age of 70 years, as this group has been found to be at increased risk for road accidents (17). Participants responded to notices placed in libraries and churches or were directly recruited by the researcher. Twelve people who surrendered their drivers licence in the past two years and 14 current drivers were invited to participate. The driver group consisted of seven males and seven females ranging in age from 70 to 85 years of age. The ex-drivers' group was made up of seven males and five females ranging in age from 70 to over 90 years of age. Half of the drivers were married and most of the ex-drivers were widowed. Almost all of the respondents reported their health as being average to excellent.

Respondents participated in one in-depth telephone interview with a research assistant. Each interview was between forty-five to sixty minutes in length. Prior to the interview each participant was sent a letter explaining the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, the confidential aspects of the research and the type of information that was being sought. As well respondents were assured that at any time they could withdraw from the project or choose not to answer questions. A short questionnaire, consisting of demographics and open-ended questions on the meaning of driving, was used to guide the semi-structured interview.

All of the interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed and analysed by the researchers. In the preliminary reading of each transcript descriptive categories were used to code sections of each informant's narrative. Following Seidman's (18) suggestions of analysing thematic connections the researchers then searched for connecting issues among these categories and for connections or themes between the various categories. Thus each participant's narrative was analysed and themes identified that expressed similar problems, concerns, differences and experiences of members of the research cohort.

The themes that were identified included meaning of licence, the doctor's role in cessation of driving, rite of passage and loss, driving conditions and experiences as drivers. On a second reading of the transcripts a theme that differentiated each group was observed. For the drivers, a theme emerged describing how the continued use of their car was necessary in order to maintain their life style. In contrast, the ex-driver group spoke of how they were able to manage their life style using alternative transport. The following section makes use of respondents' stories to illustrate the two themes of drivers' view of the anticipated loss of their licence and how ex-drivers maintain their life style. The importance of the participant's stories is that they represent the interpretation of the way in which people understand the meaning of their life (19, 20).

Results

People in the driving group argued that driving enabled them to maintain their independence by allowing them to perform shopping activities and engage in social activities. They also insisted that the convenience of driving a car meant they had the freedom to decide their daily routine that in turn contributed to their feeling of independence. The two main activities that respondents reported using their car were for shopping and socialising. They felt getting to the shops and returning with packages would be nearly impossible or very difficult without a car. Driving gave them the ability to go to a variety of places for either a major shop or to pick up a few items at their leisure. For the older drivers, the ability to choose when and where they would shop meant that they were independent and in-charge of their lives. In the following stories the link between driving, independence and freedom can be heard.

*I think you have to say that when you go shopping without a car you can't do it (D1).
When you go out shopping, without a car you can't do it. You can't bring home anything and it is too much trouble (D2).*

In addition, there appeared to be a strong connection between shopping and socialising as many of the drivers took friends with them on shopping trips or called in to see friends on the way. This appeared to accentuate the importance of the driver role.

It is mainly shopping driving that we are doing and then we go to the Lodge which is that way (D3).

I take quite a few people out shopping, I go shopping once a week and I take three maybe four people in the car with me to go shopping (D5).

The drivers referred to convenience as one of the most important reasons for maintaining the ability to drive. Within this theme, the idea of their freedom could be heard. Many indicated that unless they drove they would be restricted in their movements and reliant on others for their transport needs. They spoke of having the ability to plan their day at the last moment without having to consider transport factors. This flexibility fostered their feelings of freedom and independence.

When you have a car and you suddenly decide to do something, you go out and get in it, and that is the part that you are going to miss most (D10).

It would be dreadfully inconvenient to get around and I would have to re-consider what I did with my life (D14).

The theme of convenience could be heard in drivers' reluctance to use alternative transport. Drivers contended that taxis were expensive and buses and trains were unreliable and time consuming, thus rendering them inconvenient. This inconvenience also extended to accepting rides with friends and family members, as this also reduced their feelings of independence.

Taxis are rather costly aren't they? If they were to improve the bus service far more people would use it. (D4).

I applaud the people who travel on public transport but if you are in a hurry and you miss a train you wait half an hour, when you get to the station, you have missed another train and you wait another half of an hour (D7).

Well I could take a taxi, but it would make it a lot more difficult because I would have to sort of fit in with them all the time. I can't sort of plan anything very well. I go over there at the drop of the hat (D9).

Some drivers were happy to use alternative transport to supplement their driving, but they were not particularly open to using it as their sole mode.

I am very independent. I don't mind occasionally but I would not like imposing on people. I would want to solve my transport problems myself (D3).

The way in which drivers interpreted the meaning of driving can be heard in the anticipated loss they expressed when they were asked to reflect on the prospect of ceasing their driving. For some it meant abandoning a valued life role such as a worker, volunteer or family member.

If I gave up driving, I give up my job (D6).

... if I am ever needed which I was the other week ... one of them was sick at school and I had to go and so I'm glad when I have the car ...that is something that you are doing for somebody else (D7).

The prospect of changing or altering their current roles was not something they were readily willing to accept.

I won't be happy about handing my license in, but when I finally convince myself that I am a danger on the road then I will give it up. I won't be happy about it (D5).

The unwillingness to cease driving was made more poignant with the reiterated analogy comparing the loss of driving to the loss of a limb. This signalled the significant anxiety, fear and negative feelings experienced by older drivers at their anticipated loss of freedom.

It is like cutting off your right arm (D11)

It has affected me very much ... what could the future hold? (D14)

We have to encourage people to give up driving. We know how painful an experience it is. It is like cutting off your right arm (D3).

The motor car is nothing more than an extension of my legs (D8).

Similar themes of convenience and freedom could be heard from ex-drivers when they spoke of the memories they had of driving a car. These were the memories they chose to “unforget” (20). In other words, these memories were those they had chosen to represent a world that can only be known in relation to those experiences that are meaningful and not meaningful to each particular participant. These stories are indicative of the unforgotten convenience.

There are times when having the car you could dash out for a while and do what you want to do (XD3).

The car was the only way of getting around. So it was a matter of convenience and privilege (XD8).

It was just convenient, you know to have the car to go for shopping and going away on holidays (XD10).

In your car, you could just hop in it and go when you feel like it and come back when you feel like it. That is the convenience of a car ... freedom if you have got your car. You can make up your mind when and where you want to go (XD1).

At the same time the ex-drivers' stories conveyed a sense of acceptance of loss of driving. There appeared to be a general sense that life and independence did not stop the day they decided to cease driving.

But it is difficult to give up your freedom and independence all in the one hit. I didn't want to, but I have learnt that if you want to get out you have got to learn to accept help (XD5). You can get along without cars. You can get everywhere in a cab now, cheaper than driving your own car (XD6).

Ex-drivers related that when they stopped driving, they experienced significant difficulties during an initial adjustment period. The adjustment period was not experienced uniformly by all of them, with some indicating more intense feelings and longer adjustment periods. However, all of the ex-drivers indicated that following this adjustment period they accepted their new way of life and felt able to carry out their regular daily activities without discomfort.

I had a car at home and I used to drive all over the place and I actually did do a lot of driving but I don't miss it now (XD6).

Giving up the car was the hardest part of my life. I have just gotten used to it now. The first twelve months after giving the car away, that nearly killed me (XD9).

I prepared for it, it wasn't a shock you know . . . (XD3).

In a similar way to the drivers', ex-drivers used the analogy of ceasing to drive and losing a part of the body necessary for freedom. In the ex-drivers case they were able to reconcile the loss of this something critical to their freedom.

To me it was like losing an arm or a leg, it really was. I thought, it is a part of my life gone now, 40 years and I have given up my drivers license. I felt an emptiness in my life. You could have chopped my left hand off ... that's how I felt. Suddenly it hit me. But you get over it. (XD8).

Once the ex-drivers accepted the change of lifestyle that accompanied the cessation of driving, they developed alternative strategies in order to resume their valued daily activities. The use of alternative transport by this group was down to a fine art form. Taxis, buses and cars of family and friends were the main types of alternative transport used to their advantage.

I still do voluntary work. I belong to the St Vincent de Paul Society and we visit the sick. I work at the hospital coffee shop. (XD6).

I work from home now, I have worked from home for the last two or three years. I think it is just one of those things you have got to live with and be prepared to sacrifice if the need arises (XD3).

I am quite happy. There is a bus at the door if I want it. I would rather go in a taxi. That's what I am like. I think I am just independent (XD11).

I take a bus out to Chermiside and if I have got quite a big order I will have it home delivered, otherwise if I haven't got a lot I get a taxi back home (XD8).

Ever since I discovered the maxi-taxi it is very hard to find me home. I don't believe in sitting around all day twiddling my thumbs (XD10).

Finally, within the ex-drivers' stories can be heard a sub-theme of their discovering a new social network that is situated in a climate of friendship, mutuality and independence. Acceptance and satisfaction with a new stage of life and recognition that this stage of life can be lived in a positive way underscore these stories.

I have friends and family who take me to do my shopping. I just fit in with them (XD11).

We have public transport right outside the door which is good. I go for public transport. Friends pick me up and take me over to the club, and bring me home. I lap it up. (XD6).

I was upset to start with because it was such a loss you know, but I am quite reconciled now. I have friends here who take me to do my shopping (XD2).

Discussion

The concern about maintaining independence can be clearly heard in the stories of the drivers. They appear to fiercely defend their need to continue driving in order to maintain their independent lifestyle. They express a substantial fear of the anticipated loss of driving and practically deny that such a meaningful activity could cease. According to Van Gennep's (15) theory, these drivers' stories may be viewed as being in the early rite of passage phase. At this stage they are anticipating the separation from a meaningful activity which in this case is the cessation of driving. However, once an individual volunteers or is compelled to cease driving the process of the rite of passage unfolds.

The ex-drivers described ceasing driving activities as giving up their licence and no longer driving the car. This stage describes Van Gannep's separation stage as the respondents no longer engaged in an activity they thought was necessary in order to maintain their life style. The second stage of transition can be heard in the respondents' stories of their struggle with the effect of no longer driving on their overall lifestyle. This study did not closely investigate the experiences of the older adults during this second stage, thus further research is warranted.

Independence also emerged as an important aspect of living in the ex-drivers' stories. Their stories tell of engaging in valued daily activities that helped to develop and maintain a strong sense of independence. As well, the ex-drivers expressed satisfaction with their lives. Thus the final stage of incorporation saw the emergence of a re-defined life-style and independence that fostered the continuation of meaningful and happy lifestyles.

As one of the aspects of independence is achieved when older adults have "access to the same range of activities as others in the community" (4, p. 5), the ex-driver respondents clearly continue to achieve this important contributor to successful ageing. They developed alternative strategies that give them the freedom to function as independent adults, deciding how and when to conduct their daily business and activities. Thus, these older adults who live in a metropolitan area may be considered to have successfully passed through this rite of passage

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